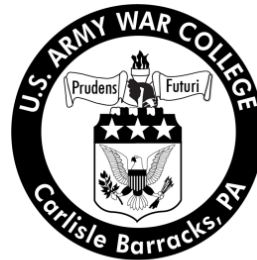


## Enduring U.S. Interests in the Persian Gulf Region

by

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United States Army War College  
Class of 2012

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USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**ENDURING U.S. INTERESTS IN THE PERSIAN GULF REGION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Despite the withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq in 2011, the United States maintains significant national security interests in the Persian Gulf region. Those interests need to be protected and advanced by proactive political, military, and other measures including the shared responsibility for the navigation and trafficability throughout the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. The Islamic Republic of Iran remains a major foreign policy and security challenge for the U.S. and its strategic and trading partners because of its aggressive nature and demonstrated willingness to acquire the technology that could yield deployment of nuclear weapons. More modest defense appropriations will constrain American force projection thus necessitating a more collective response to ensure Gulf security, including the possible introduction of outside stakeholders such as China and India. In the meantime, the United States will need to work with its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and other regional partners to ensure that they have the capacity, interoperability, and willingness to work alone and/or in concert to discourage Iranian aggression.





## ENDURING U.S. INTERESTS IN THE PERSIAN GULF REGION

The withdrawal of United States' and coalition troops from protracted conflict in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation New Dawn) begins a new phase in an established pattern of American interest and involvement in the Persian Gulf region. Even though the future of Iraq as a "sovereign, stable and self-reliant" entity remains one of the most important issues as articulated in the latest edition of the National Security Strategy (NSS), strategic planners and national leadership recognize the growing challenges that the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) presents as the most serious and direct threat to U.S. interests as well as to the economic and security interests of much of the world's petroleum consumers.<sup>1</sup> It also represents the most serious military and intelligence challenge for the nations of Gulf Cooperation Council, most of which are both critical security partners for the U.S and energy oil producers for much of the developed world.<sup>2</sup>

Iran's potential acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), its aggressive use of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) elements and surrogates throughout the region to spread its message and mayhem, and its oft-repeated threat to impede or harass shipping in the Persian Gulf, will continue to be a major challenge to American foreign policy for the foreseeable future. In addition, Iran's frequent threats to the security and viability of the state of Israel concern American political and military leaders and complicate larger security interests and relationships in the Middle East. To counter the rising threat and potential for further Iranian aggression in the region, the United States should not only position itself to respond appropriately across the

spectrum of political, military, and diplomatic tools but also encourage other stakeholders to take a larger role in underwriting Persian Gulf security.

The global economy remains largely affected if not heavily dependent on the export of a substantial portion of the world production of petroleum products that pass through the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz every day. Much of the developed and affluent world in East Asia and Europe benefits directly from an expensive American commitment to ensure that commercial and other maritime traffic can safely pass through the Persian Gulf to ultimate markets and consumers. The United States is facing both a growing concern about the Iranian threat to interfere with this traffic as well as growing resource constraints to thwart that threat. This paper will outline traditional and enduring U.S. national interests in the Persian Gulf region, threats to those interests, and policy recommendations as a way ahead to the national command authority, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander, and other emerging stakeholders, such as the People's Republic of China (PRC) and India.

### Historical Context

The American interest in the security of the Persian Gulf has grown significantly over the last half century. From early in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century until the 1970s, the Gulf was a virtual British lake--most of the coterminous emirates, sheikdoms, and Trucial States of the lower Persian Gulf were well-established British protectorates providing crucial land bridge and strategic lines of communication to British interests on the Indian subcontinent and beyond. Over time "the historic rivalry between the United Kingdom and Russia in the Middle East and the decline of the British Empire provided the setting for the emergence of the United States as a major actor in the region."<sup>3</sup>

Original American ties with the states and people of the greater Middle East were characterized mostly as religious or cultural in character; but since the beginning of World War II the geopolitical and economic importance of the region to U.S. national interest grew significantly. During the war, the Persian Gulf region was somewhat of a sideshow from most of the major combatants' point of view, but it became an important source of petroleum products and a strategic lifeline to provide assistance to allied Russia.<sup>4</sup> After the war, the continued discovery and development of the vast oil reserves in and around the region accompanied by Soviet expansion and communist insurgencies necessitated a growing U.S. national security concern for the Gulf and beyond. This low cost energy source no doubt significantly aided American and allied efforts in rebuilding Europe and Japan along democratic lines as a bulwark against Soviet expansion.<sup>5</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War dramatically changed the geopolitical aspect of Gulf security.<sup>6</sup> What was once essentially a British protectorate became an inherited American responsibility.

As the British saw their ability to defend their interests in the region swiftly decline in the late 1960s and withdrew from their "east of Suez" responsibility, American interest and responsibility correspondingly increased—even so, it "still took over three years...of advance notice (for the U.S) to accept direct responsibility for the security of the Gulf and the peninsula, let alone take up Britain's shield."<sup>7</sup> The "changing of the guard" of responsibility from the United Kingdom to the United States occurred over several decades—from "an interval of relatively low commitment during the 1970s followed by two subsequent decades of increasing involvement and concern."<sup>8</sup>

Today crude oil and petroleum products from the Persian Gulf region remain the essential fuel for economic growth throughout the world. It is the single most important source of oil for the world economy; somewhere between 15-20% of all the world's daily crude petroleum exports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, into the Gulf of Oman, and from there principally to the developed nations of the Far East and Europe. A reasonable energy forecast is that more than 30 percent of global demand from the region will pass through the Strait of Hormuz in less than 20 years, travelling particularly to China and India as they progress towards becoming top-tier economic powers.<sup>9</sup> In fact, much of the current demand pressure on fuel prices is due to these two burgeoning economies, which have seen annual GDP growth rates approaching or exceeding double digits in the last 10 years.

The removal of U.S. combat forces from Iraq at the end of 2011 poses much more of a challenge than just the possible destabilization of the newly-formed coalition government of Nouri al-Maliki that was cobbled together in 2010. The U.S. and Iran have been in competition for influence in the Gulf since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and there is a danger that the perceived lack of commitment to the fledgling Iraq government and to the Persian Gulf region at large may create an opportunity, or miscalculation, on behalf of the Iranian leadership. Iran is likely to exploit any weakness after the withdrawal of U.S. troops and has already demonstrated a willingness to be a spoiler in the Iraqi security situation, both to ensure Iraq does not reemerge as a rival and to eliminate American influence in any post-conflict U.S.-Iraqi security arrangement.<sup>10</sup>

## The Iranian Challenge to Persian Gulf Security

Iran's size, geography, natural resources, technological posture, and revolutionary fervor all contribute to its status as a regional power with global political reach and influence. Iran's activities and interests in the Persian Gulf reflect its leadership's belief that Iran should be the dominant power in the region by virtue of its geography, demography, and natural resources. This attitude or outlook translates into a desire to control the Persian Gulf militarily and deny that ability to others. Because the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are relatively weak and disjointed as a regional security entity and because Iraq's political and military influence has been enervated by the events of the past ten years, Iran will remain the focus of U.S. efforts with respect to Persian Gulf security for the foreseeable future. Thus, "the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is an unconventional adversary that requires unconventional approaches in planning, strategy, and policy."<sup>11</sup>

American security interests with respect to Iran developed during and immediately after World War II when the demand and value of Iranian oil production was accelerated by the war itself. With the withdrawal of British forces, American foreign and defense policy focused on preventing an aggressive Soviet Union from dominating Iran for access to a warm water port on the Persian Gulf, and more recently of particular concern have been Iran's efforts to develop nuclear weapons and the means to deliver those weapons. Subsequent to Britain's withdrawal from its presence and policy of "east of Suez" in 1968, the United States determined that its security interests demand a continued military presence in the region, particularly in the context of the Cold War and Soviet military activity in and around the Gulf. President Richard Nixon established

that Iran, along with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, would serve as one of the pillars to maintain stability in the region.

Iran went from being one of the “twin pillars” of Gulf and regional stability from the early 1970s to an object of “dual containment” and the *bête noir* of American foreign policy in over just a little over a decade. It has arguably become the predominant geopolitical and strategic challenge that drives the continued U.S. maritime and military presence in the region. The original policy was undermined by the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and was supplanted by a doctrine of force projection and forward presence, primarily naval, developed and expanded by both the Carter and Reagan administrations and continued to the present day.

Besides the aforementioned suspected efforts to develop nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, Iran is of concern to every state in the region on many fronts: 1) continued occupation of territories claimed by neighboring states (the United Arab Emirates islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs); 2) sponsorship of extremist groups throughout the region and the world; 3) active role in destabilizing other Gulf states; 4) efforts to spread Persian and Shia’ influence in the region.<sup>12</sup>

Iran’s conventional and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) air, ground, and naval forces already pose challenges for defense planners. Though it does not have a significant power projection capability, Iran does have a sufficient maritime fleet, both surface and subsurface, to hazard commercial and naval vessels operating in and outside the Gulf, to include the approaches through the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman. In particular, Iran’s ability to lay mines, deploy surface-to-surface missiles, and sortie its Kilo-class diesel submarine fleet are major challenges for all navigation in the Gulf. The

Iranians has given priority to development of a more modern fleet recently, but it is highly unlikely that it could challenge the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet in a head-to-head confrontation; however, its ability to "conduct limited or unconventional warfare, or to threaten traffic, through the Gulf...gives Iran the potential ability to threaten or intimidate its neighbors."<sup>13</sup> Having said that, it is also true that Iran is as heavily dependent on commerce and the international trade of petroleum products as the other major oil producers of the region, as Hunter notes: "Given the size of its economy, its dependence on oil and gas income, and its lack of any realistic alternative to exporting through the strait (of Hormuz), Iran is as dependent on freedom of navigation...as any other littoral country."<sup>14</sup>

Iran's challenge to U.S. and other stakeholder security is deliberate and on many geopolitical fronts. The most immediate concern is the development and deployment of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missiles with which to deliver them. However, Iran poses a number of challenges, particularly the capability to disrupt. Iran's frequent threats to shut off oil traffic from the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz are largely regarded as bluster and not a realistic strategic or military option for it to advance its national interests. Its current naval, air, and missile forces give it some capability to harass commercial oil and other traffic in the Gulf but any such action would be counterproductive. Harassment efforts are likely to be inconvenient and temporarily costly, but as in the case of the Tanker War in the 1990s, commerce will not stop.

#### The Gulf Cooperation Council

In response to the dramatic events surrounding the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, and other related political and social

upheavals, the six Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman) bordering the Persian Gulf formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1980. Though its ostensible provenance was a result of the political and social upheaval associated with the Iranian Revolution along with Sunni Arab states' concern of a growing Shia'-Persian threat to regional stability and security, the GCC does not manifest the qualities and activities associated with a robust or credible collective security organization or arrangement; to the contrary, its charter (Article Four), notably avoids any mention of security or combined military activity:

The basic objectives of the Cooperation Council are: To effect coordination, integration and inter-connection between Member States in all fields in order to achieve unity between (sic) them. To formulate similar regulations in various fields including the following: economic and financial affairs; commerce, customs and communications; education and culture.<sup>15</sup>

Even with progress in the political and economic areas and a common culture and history, the GCC states still demonstrate no urgency to proceed to a meaningful



Figure 1:



collective security arrangement nor do they have the necessarily defensive capability in many important areas. In recent history most substantial combined naval and other military exercises in the Gulf with the GCC states were either largely organized or underwritten by U.S. and/or British forces. Progress in the area of interoperability or integration has largely been cosmetic or a result of outside support and influence.<sup>16</sup> This inability or desire to integrate military strategy or capabilities is a significant vulnerability for all the GCC states that have typically underfunded their readiness, manpower, training, and sustainment in favor of what could only be described as the “glitter factor.” The Gulf States have typically bought relatively high-end and expensive air, sea, and land platforms but failed to either maintain them or employ them with properly trained, indigenous crew. This tendency is part of what the military analyst and scholar, Anthony Cordesman, has termed “deficient military culture.” Cordesman, one of the most experienced and thorough analysts of Gulf region security issues, asserts that “(r)egional security is largely a myth, not a military reality...(the GCC) has made some advances in military cooperation and internal security, but it largely remains a hollow shell.”<sup>17</sup> The GCC has established a military organization called the Peninsula Shield Force, but like other attempts to integrate Gulf military forces, it has demonstrated limited utility and effectiveness. Part of the challenge for the GCC states is the reluctance or wariness of the smaller countries in dealing with Saudi Arabia as the preeminent power in the council.

Each of the six GCC countries has significant national security implications for the United States to varying degrees in their own right, from energy resources to host nation support for larger American interests in the region and beyond. In addition, they

consider their relationship with the United States vital to their security. The GCC states have developed a modus vivendi with their Iranian neighbors, particularly as it relates to commerce and some political issues; but for the most part they remain very wary of Iranian activities and continue to (mostly) privately encourage American naval and other military presence in the Gulf. As Hunter states, "Despite a substantial period of pragmatism and stability in Iran's relations with the GCC states in the 1990s...GCC leaders today can still consider Iran a threat for several reasons," including basic geography, revolutionary (Shi'a) fervor, foreign policy style, and nuclear ambition, to name a few.<sup>18</sup>

Because the GCC states have limited capability individually or among themselves due to the integration challenges and mutual lack of trust, they are unable to defend against a determined Iranian effort to disrupt or deny Iranian naval or other military activities in or around the Gulf. Complicating the matter is that the balance in the region once provided by Iraq does not exist in 2012 and is unlikely to be revived for several years because of the effects of Operation Iraqi Freedom/New Dawn and the subsequent withdrawal of all U.S. combat power from Iraq.

The United States maintains excellent relations with all of the GCC countries, though the Saudi-U.S partnership suffered some tension and stress in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Both on the military-to-military front and in most geostrategic and political areas, American and Gulf states have found that their regional security interests converge. Although some policy disagreements remain in areas such as the utility and wisdom of the Iraq invasion in 2003, the symbiotic relationship between the United States and GCC has remained and strengthened because of the

Iranian activity as well as those of various insurgent/terrorist groups on the peninsula. The three general enduring interests that can be distinctly identified as U.S. policy in the region—access to oil markets, prevention of WMD proliferation, and denial of safe havens for violent extremist networks—conform with the interests of the GCC states and with most of the other states of the region as well. The next several paragraphs provide a brief picture on some of the activity and interests where the United States and the GCC states converge.

Since the invasion and occupation by the Iraqi regime in 1990, Kuwait remains a solid partner for operations directly affecting Iraq and provides important basing rights for American air and land forces engaged in operations throughout the region. Kuwait hosts the headquarters for the U.S. Army land component for CENTCOM and is a major purchaser of American arms such as the F-18 Hornet and Patriot Missile System.

Bahrain has consistently been the most U.S.-friendly Gulf state from an historical perspective and has allowed the U.S. Fifth Fleet to maintain and expand its headquarters there since its establishment in the 1990s. Like most of the other GCC states, Bahrain is also a major purchaser or recipient of U.S. military equipment, including surface ships and combat aircraft. Bahrain, however, unlike the other five states of the GCC, is not a major producer of petroleum.

The United Arab Emirates (U.A.E) is rapidly becoming the largest customer of the foreign military sales component of U.S. security assistance programs. In addition, the U.A.E. provides berthing and husbanding of U.S. naval vessels which are essential for forward basing and support of the Fifth Fleet. The facilities at Jebel Ali near the emirate of Dubai can accommodate the largest surface ships, including aircraft carriers

and guided missile cruisers. The U.A.E. also is a regular and eager participant in bilateral exercises with the United States Air Force. The U.A.E. has demonstrated its willingness to support larger U.S. national security interests in the region by offering to provide service as a major airhead and transshipment site for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). This was a remarkable offer and development in the wake of the American (political) decision to prevent the U.A.E.'s Dubai Port World company from purchasing a British entity that managed port operations in several states in the United States. The offer to host the terminus for an air bridge to support Afghanistan may have been an important factor in the negotiations between the United States and Kyrgyzstan to maintain its operations at the Transit Center at Manas, a U.S. Air Force forward base supporting OEF.

The Gulf state of Qatar has rapidly become both a major supporter and enabler of U.S. foreign policy as well as an arms customer, particularly since the events of 9/11. Qatar has hosted a large share of American and allied troops and aircraft flying into and through the region supporting both OEF and OIF and combined/joint operations in the Horn of Africa. Qatar shares with Iran the world's largest known natural gas field. This development has at once complicated somewhat Qatar's relationship with Iran, with which it generally maintains cordial relations.

The Sultanate of Oman has been a reliable support of the United States since the early 1980s when it allowed aircraft marshalling and staging in support of the American hostage rescue attempt into Iran. Oman continues to host several bilateral exercises with the United States every year and provides facilities for the staging of prepositioned war material. The Omanis are unique in that they are the only GCC

country that is primarily outside the Persian Gulf and has a fairly competent and robust navy compared to some of its Gulf partners. Oman also is not typical in that it has a very good relationship with Iran and the United States; the Omanis routinely host Iranian ships as well as political and military leaders from Iran, and not unlike many of their other GCC partners have a sizeable population that is ethnically Persian.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remains the linchpin of the United States-GCC relationship because of its wealth, size, and influence throughout the Arab and Muslim world. As mentioned, a great deal of tension was created between the Saudis and U.S. in the aftermath of the events of 9/11 but the relationship has returned to equilibrium. Saudis attend U.S. military schools, participate in joint/combined exercises, and are large purchasers of U.S. military equipment from E-3 AWACS to major ground weapon systems.

#### China and India—Rising Powers and Stakeholders

It has been conventional wisdom for most Americans that their prosperous lifestyle, U.S. economy, and national security are “dependent” on continued access to low-cost Persian Gulf energy resources. This common misperception seems to justify a considerable commitment to a forward presence to ensure continued access. This commonly held assumption of dependence on Gulf energy sources, however, is belied by current data. The United States imports oil primarily from western sources (Canada and Mexico, inter alia) and gets only a mere fraction (around 14 percent) from the Persian Gulf.<sup>19</sup> Most of the petroleum products shipped through the Strait of Hormuz or across the Arabian Peninsula go to East Asia or Europe. Both China and India have a growing demand for the petroleum produced in the Gulf and are thus becoming more important stakeholders in the overall security and access to the markets of the region.

The Energy Information Administration projects that by 2030, China will get approximately one-third of its oil from the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Kemp of the Nixon Center cites China's dependence as being even greater: "(M)ore than 40 percent of China's oil comes from the GCC's six member states."<sup>21</sup> In 2010, India was already purchasing 45 percent of its oil requirements from the region, and by 2030 it is expected to acquire over 50 percent of its oil from the Middle East.<sup>22</sup>

China is rapidly becoming strategically and economically tied to the Gulf. Sinopec, the Chinese oil concern and the largest producer and supplier of oil products in Asia, is already Saudi Aramco's top crude oil customer.<sup>23</sup> Both the Saudis and Chinese also see the relationship as increasingly strategic; a senior Sinopec official told the new Saudi Crown Prince, Nayef bin Adbdul-Aziz, that the completion of a recently signed \$8.5 billion joint venture deal for the opening of a Red Sea refinery demonstrates the "firm willingness to join hands in coping with challenges and safeguard common interests amid profound adjustments to global situations."<sup>24</sup>

Economic and geopolitical imperatives are creating within China and India (and for most other growing economies of East Asia) an abiding interest in ensuring the security of the Gulf states, including Iran, and maintaining the sea lines of communication. Because of this and the fact that the forward presence of U.S. naval and other military forces are becoming more expensive and less sustainable from an American domestic political point of view, it may become useful or perhaps necessary to develop a Gulf security approach that includes a more significant participation from China and India. The Japanese, who should also figure into this calculus, are still hamstrung for the most part by their constitutional prohibitions concerning their defense

structure and deployment. U.S. deployments of carrier battle groups and submarines will likely continue to maintain sea control throughout the Indian Ocean and approaches to the Persian Gulf, but both the modernized Indian and Chinese navies could create a more multipolar balance of power in the region. Both of these nations are deploying and training outside their normal operating areas now and provide some stability or regional security over time. However, because of the vulnerability and instability of the Gulf itself, “(i)t is unlikely that any of the major Asian powers...have any interest in moving into this small, crowded, and dangerous area.”<sup>25</sup>

#### Maintenance of Persian Gulf Security

The United States today faces significant and multi-dimensional challenges in the Persian Gulf region and throughout southwest Asia. The good news is that most of these challenges have as much impact on much of the developed world in the eastern hemisphere as they do in the West. The down side is that few large powers have been willing to step up to support the United States in its efforts to keep the sea lanes open. For instance, the Europeans are about twice as dependent on Middle East energy products as the United States. However, neither NATO or the European Union have had a unified approach, strategy, or even participation in the defense of the Gulf and its resources because of lack of political will and/or public support.<sup>26</sup>

The GCC states maintain a continued wariness of Iranian intentions—wariness about Iran’s intention to dominate the Gulf itself through its air and sea power and wariness as to its intentions to undermine governance over the Shia’ population resident in most of the states of the southern Gulf. The GCC states have a perception of Iran as desiring to reign as the hegemonic power bent on dominating the region, if under favorable circumstances. Iran’s perceived intransigence over the U.A.E. smaller islands

(Abu Musa and the Greater/Lesser Tunbs), apparent aggressive pursuit of nuclear weapons and a ballistic missile program, and its aggressive patrolling inside its neighbor's territorial waters all work to undermine any confidence-building measures that may be on the horizon.<sup>27</sup>

In the wake of the withdrawal of combat forces from Iraq in late 2011, the United States will likely return to a more modest military footprint in the Persian Gulf. In early 2012 the United States had approximately 50,000 military personnel serving in the area, most either aboard U.S. naval vessels or part of a residual combat support footprint in Kuwait as a hedge against a potential destabilizing in Iraq or emergent aggression by Iran.<sup>28</sup> The challenge for the United States and its regional partners will be to insure that they have the capability to respond to a range of eventualities, from Iranian harassment of commercial shipping to an incipient insurgent to threats to friendly regimes such as was evident in Bahrain during the “Arab Spring” protests in 2011.

A more circumspect and shared American responsibility will be shaped not only by domestic political and economic/budget constraints, but by the practical consideration that a continued policy of a very visible U.S. troop presence in the Gulf and on Arab soil may attract violent protests and heighten the possibility of terrorist attacks. A populist reaction against the United States presence and effort to maintain order and stability in the region may prompt heretofore friendly host nations to deny access to facilities, training areas, and military-to-military contact. The fallout could result in diminution of the American ability to protect strategic lines of communications in and out of the Gulf for itself and stakeholder nations in Asia and Europe.<sup>29</sup>



In order to minimize the political and strategic risk that the United States faces in the Persian Gulf region but still advance very important, if not vital, U.S. national security interests there, several deliberate and parallel efforts can be enjoined by American strategists and planners. First, continue to improve the capability of friendly Gulf Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, to defend them against the Iranian ballistic missile threat.

Another tool that the U.S. government has at its disposal is in the area of what is commonly referred to as “building partner capacity” (BPC). BPC is part of a larger security assistance framework which provides defense articles, military training, and other defense-related services in furtherance of national security policies and objectives.<sup>30</sup>

Iranian development and testing of theater and intercontinental ballistic missile capability is becoming of great concern to the Gulf Arab states as well as Israeli and U.S. military planners. Iranian senior leaders frequently make references to its missile forces as a deterrent and boast about their progress in missile technology.<sup>31</sup> Iran’s current estimated ballistic missile coverage is from 150 to 5500 kilometers and could be used against soft targets as a weapon of terror and intimidation and as compensation for its lack of effective offensive air power.<sup>32</sup>

The United States should also continue to enhance its regional partnerships in the maritime domain. It should focus on cooperation with the navies of the GCC states to counter both the “soft power” activities of the Iranian Navy (IRIN) and particularly the threat posed by the asymmetric modernization strategy of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN).<sup>33</sup>

## Gulf Security and the “Arab Spring”

The one wild card that may affect the stability and economic viability of the Persian Gulf region and thus American security interests is the political and social movement that has been described as the “Arab Spring.” The phenomenon first manifested itself in late 2010 in the Arab North African states of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, but it has also been evident on the Arabian Peninsula in Bahrain and Yemen. Each of the Arab states that were affected by the Arab Spring have particular and local cultural, political and economic characteristics that are causative, if not explanatory, but generally have developed in countries with a history of tyrannical and corrupt one-man or one-family regimes. The Gulf Arab states, with the notable exception of Bahrain, have been relatively immune from the contagion so far. Bahrain is of obvious concern to the United States because it has been the long-time home of the U.S. Fifth Fleet/Naval Forces Central Command. American-Bahraini cooperation and friendship goes back nearly half a century and many of the Bahraini elite families, including the scions of the ruling al-Khalifa family, have attended the American elementary and secondary Department of Defense-sponsored schools in the country. In an interesting and perhaps counterintuitive way, the Arab Spring may actually assist in advancing U.S. interests in the region by: a) increasing the price of oil and natural gas, which directly benefit the producing states; b) set back Iranian gains in prestige in a reinvigorated Arab world; and c) displace the more radical Islamist threat for more modern forms of government.<sup>34</sup>

Yemen, although technically not a Persian Gulf nation, figures largely into the security calculus of much of the region and beyond. Yemen is significant because of its geostrategic location sitting astride one of the most important chokepoints, the Bab al Mandeb, for commercial maritime traffic, arguably more important than even the Strait

of Hormuz, which could theoretically be bypassed by overland transport or pipelines. Yemen presents problems for its neighbors on the Arabian Peninsula because, much like Afghanistan, much of its territory and inhabitants are either ungoverned or ungovernable. Yemen has become unstable because of traditional separatist movements that have divided the north and south, the emergence of Al Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the al Huthi conflict that have collectively rendered the central government in Sana'a powerless. Ali Abdullah Saleh, who served as president of the country since its reunification in the early 1990s, was so unpopular that he not only resigned his position but fled the country, ostensibly for health reasons. The instability in Yemen poses a serious enough challenge for the GCC countries and others in the region that the GCC and Arab League came out in support of Saudi actions to prevent threats to Saudi and Yemeni sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> Yemen has also served as a staging base for pirates operating in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden as well as a transmigration center for immigrants from the Horn of Africa moving up the Arabian Peninsula. On the positive side, the Yemeni government and military have built a cooperative relationship with the United States in the fight against AQAP as well as the pirates. The principal risk for U.S. interests in Yemen is that of a failed state on the Somali model, which would have significant impact on commerce as well as providing a safe haven for AQAP and other violent extremist networks.

### Conclusion

The security of the Persian Gulf region will remain an important strategic pillar of U.S. foreign policy for years to come. The most current iteration of the National Security Strategy published in 2010 ranks several issues that are directly affected by the political, military, and economic activities of the Gulf region and the greater Middle East,

including combating violent extremist networks and WMD proliferation. Meanwhile, the worldwide demand for Persian Gulf petrochemical resources grows, particularly by the emerging economic powers, China and India. The United States has been the guarantor of first resort for much of the last half-century and is inextricably tied to the safety and security of the region for the time being, but it will increasingly be hard pressed to bear the responsibility of Gulf security by itself. The challenge for the United States in light of current fiscal constraints on the Department of Defense and a shift in strategic priority to the Western Pacific/East Asia will be to find capable and willing partners and stakeholders, like China and certainly the states of the Gulf themselves, to bear more of the burden for ensuring the trafficability of the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz as well as defending against the increasing threat of Iranian WMD and ballistic missile proliferation and intimidation.

### Endnotes

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